



Position Statement: State Senate Bill 777

For the long term well being of Michigan's family farmers and rural communities, we ask that SB 777 be withdrawn permanently from further legislative consideration for the following reasons:

While not expressly referenced in SB 777's language, many concerns surrounding genetically modified organisms (GMO's), which would be encompassed in bill language along with non-GMO's, have been brought to the fore in the debate over this bill. We feel that there are more questions than applied science has answered to date regarding the wisdom of the unregulated release of genetically altered seeds and resulting pollen and fertile offspring into the environment. For comparison purposes, contrast the development of vaccines and other products created by medical research and approved by FDA that have later been shown to have harmful results. Past examples include Thalidomide, the morning sickness drug that had such devastating impact on developing fetuses, and modern day compounds such as Vioxx, two of many "safe for use at recommended dosage" lab created products ultimately pulled from the marketplace for putting human health at risk. The good news is, these products COULD be recalled so they could do no further harm. However, GMO seeds need only USDA approval, not FDA, thereby conforming to a much lower standard for public "safety". Like opening Pandora's box, releasing living organisms such as genetically engineered seed into the environment where they can replicate, mutate, and expand their biotic influence is an entirely different situation in that they can NOT be recalled. We can not afford to risk the "law of unintended consequences".

The second objectionable consequence posed by this bill is loss of local control. Michigan has benefited substantially over the years from grass roots government that invites full participation in the democratic process by its citizens. Rural communities lost a valuable and important citizen tool for self determination when local units of government were denied their right to restrict or regulate industrial agriculture such as CAFO's from rural townships and counties. We are paying dearly for it across the state with ongoing unregulated illicit discharges of agricultural waste to waters of the state. SB 777 would add insult to injury by reducing further our rights - obligations, even - to act in concert with our neighbors in setting the standards for the quality of life we elect, where we live. Additional erosion of majority rule is outrageous and should not be tolerated.

Supporters of this ill-conceived legislation have argued from unsound and outdated positions not supported by current findings. References to the benefits gained by technology advanced in the 1950's and continued in various forms since then forget what Dr. Norman Borlaug, the "father" of the so-called "Green Revolution", cautioned over

thirty years ago. He warned that this increase in agricultural production only bought us time during which global societies needed to sort out the larger problems of population growth and the inequitable distribution of food and arable land. We have largely failed to heed his warning and are now faced with an approaching limit now accorded the more popularly accepted concept of "peak oil". Fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation, high-tech equipment, new plant varieties, etc., have pushed agricultural production to unbelievable heights. But in the past few years, that increase has plateaued, both because of increasing costs of inputs (fuel, fertilizer, etc.) and the maximization of the inherent soil capacities to give up ever greater yields. Coupled with exploding global population growth and the continuing loss of arable land to non-agricultural development, desertification, and erosion, our ability to feed the world even in peacetime is called to question.

Of great concern with respect to SB 777 is the confusion of genetically engineered plants with hybrids. Borlaug's "Green Revolution" was based on hybridization of select grain species, not genetic engineering. Hybrids are created by plant breeders who select for superior or preferred traits by crossing carefully selected parents of related plants or cultivars of the same crop to maximize those characteristics. Genetic engineering, or the creation of genetically modified organisms (GMO's), occurs in the lab using artificial manipulation of genetic material in plant DNA to create plants (and animals) that are unrelated to any naturally occurring hybrid due to their genetic variance. While hybrids have been with us a long time and generally been good for agriculture, the long term effects of genetically modified plant specimens are largely unknown or highly debatable in the real world. The logical mind concludes that granting an unconditional free pass to such created life forms in the face of local objections is not a democratic option.

It is for the foregoing reasons that the Michigan Farmers Union opposes SB 777 and urges that it be withdrawn from further consideration. Absent consensus by this committee and/or the full House of Representatives, we recommend as an alternative that a moratorium on its passage be immediately enacted. Following such action, we would support creation of a formal round table consisting of representatives of all interest groups be convened, whereby open and inclusive dialogue would be conducted over the next two years to debate and consider the merits of the proposal. At the end of the study period, a recommendation would be made back to the bill's sponsors.

This concludes our comments today and we thank you for the opportunity to respond.

April 18, 2006